

Evaluation of Tag Attachments on Small Cetaceans

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LONG-TERM GOALS

Our goal is to produce a safe and reliable, single-pin satellite-linked tagging system for deployment on small cetaceans over periods of months, with minimal risk of harm to the animals.

OBJECTIVES

1. Refine specific hypotheses for laboratory tests of tags and attachments, through review and assessment of previous single-pin tag deployments for which post-deployment observations are available (n = 179 tags, through 15 Dec 2011).
2. Evaluate hydrodynamics of currently available satellite-linked tags and attachments.
3. Determine effectiveness of changes to tags and attachments through hydrodynamic modeling.
4. Perform, under controlled circumstances, field tests of new tag designs resulting from laboratory studies conducted as part of this project, including:
 - a. Deploy (n=10, 3 real and 7 “dummy”) satellite-linked TDR tags with single-pin attachments for comparison with untagged control dolphins, during bottlenose dolphin health assessments of residents in Sarasota Bay, Florida.
 - b. Monitor and photograph conditions of tags and dolphins
 - i. Compare dolphin swimming, respiration, ranging, and social data with previous data for that individual and controls.
 - ii. Document condition of fin relative to pin migration or pressure necrosis.
 - iii. Document the position of tag on the fin, and relate to changes in transmission characteristics (surface time, data message length, and signal quality).
 - iv. Document changes in condition of tags and animals with formation of biogrowth.

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 2012		2. REPORT TYPE N/A		3. DATES COVERED -	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Evaluation of Tag Attachments on Small Cetaceans				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Chicago Zoological Society c/o Mote Marine Lab 1600 Ken Thompson Parkway Sarasota, FL 34236				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release, distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES The original document contains color images.					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT SAR	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 6	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

- v. Recapture tagged dolphins (and control dolphins) after about 6-8 weeks to remove tags, closely examine fins, and perform health assessments for comparison with data from initial deployment.
 - vi. Test corrosable attachment pins configurations
5. Publish findings in a series of peer-reviewed manuscripts in a timely manner, including the initial review of previous deployments and results of tests in the proposed project.

APPROACH

We are combining the expertise of a non-governmental organization, the Chicago Zoological Society (CZS), and a small, veteran-owned business, BelleQuant Engineering, to develop and test penetrating dorsal fin tag attachment designs for small cetaceans. Our integrative approach, aimed at improving tag attachments, addresses two questions: (1) the causes of tag success and failure, and (2) short- and long-term physical, physiological, and behavioral effects of tags on the animals. We have employed a systematic approach including computer modeling and controlled field studies during this project, building on years of development to date. Our collaborative efforts bring decades of relevant experience to these issues, including evaluation of past tag deployments, hydrodynamic modeling, and field tests of promising designs.

Dr. Brian Balmer of CZS evaluated previous records of single-point tag attachments for guidance on optimal tag positions on the dorsal fin. Dr. Laurens Howle of BelleQuant Engineering conducted computational flow dynamics modeling to arrive at an optimal tag design for field testing, and identified an appropriate position for attachment of a tag on the dorsal fin trailing edge. Dr. Randall Wells of CZS managed the project and coordinated tag production and field tests. All of these investigators, along with Dr. Michael Scott participated in the deployment and retrieval of tags for field tests. Dr. Brian Balmer and staff of the CZS Sarasota Dolphin Research Program engaged in tracking and observations of the experimental tags during field tests.

WORK COMPLETED

Eight months into the project, all of the proposed computational flow dynamics modeling and field work have been completed. Data analyses and manuscript preparation are underway and/or planned for the near-future.

RESULTS

Accomplishments are summarized preliminarily below for each objective:

1. *Refine specific hypotheses for laboratory tests of tags and attachments, through review and assessment of previous single-pin tag deployments for which post-deployment observations are available (n = 179 tags, through 15 Dec 2011).*
Evaluation of previous deployments found, in general, that attachments in the lower third of the trailing edge of the dorsal fin were of longer duration than attachments higher on the fin.

2. *Evaluate hydrodynamics of currently available satellite-linked tags and attachments.*
Computational flow dynamics modeling demonstrated that horizontally oriented tags created significantly less drag than vertically oriented tags. Undesirable turbulence was identified in association with the current horizontal tag designs: 1) immediately behind the tag, 2) at the reinforced base of the antenna, 3) the anterior edge of the tag, and 4) at the lock nuts that secure the tag to the fin. In addition, modeling demonstrated that flow patterns at some sensor locations on existing tags were conducive to biogrowth that fouled the sensors and interfered with tag function.
3. *Determine effectiveness of changes to tags and attachments through hydrodynamic modeling.*
Modifications to the smallest available satellite-linked TDR tag for single-pin attachment to dolphins (Wildlife Computers SPLASH tag) were modeled to: 1) reduce drag by adding faring to the posterior end of the tag, 2) reduce drag by filling the attachment wings as they approach the tag body, 3) reduce drag by removing reinforcement at the base of the antenna, and 4) move the sensors to areas of greater flow. At the suggestion of Wildlife Computers, the lock nuts were replaced with thread-forming flat-head screws, further reducing drag. In combination, these changes reduced drag by about 50% from the previous design. In addition, the top and bottom of the “V” where the wings meet the tag body were rounded to reduce the possibility of cutting into the fin should the tag rotate around the attachment pin and contact the trailing edge of the fin.

Wildlife Computers incorporated these suggestions into an experimental design for field tests. They also recommended a silicon-based antifouling coating, “*Propspeed*,” as a means to further reduce drag and improve tag performance. Examples of the experimental tags are shown in Figure 1.

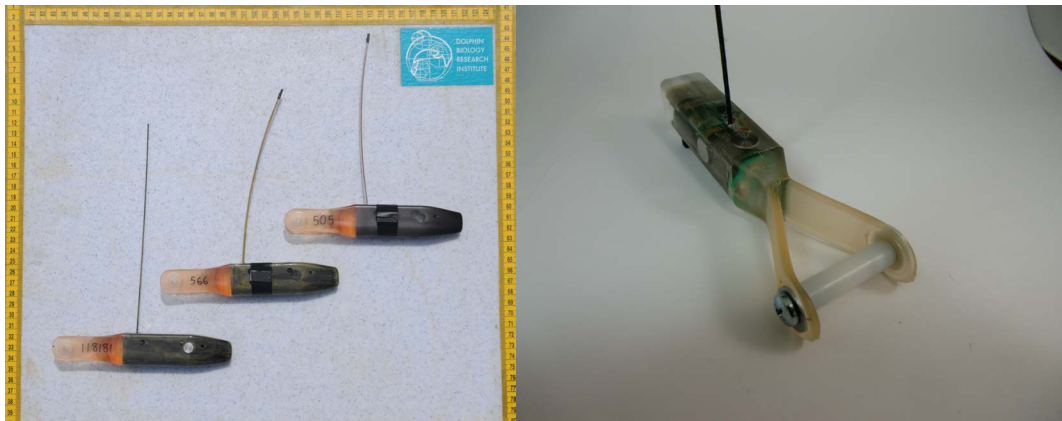


Figure 1. Left: Examples of tags deployed for experiments: a) “118181” = Splash10 satellite-linked TDR tag with PropSpeed coating; b) “566” = VHF “dummy” tag with PropSpeed coating; c) “505” = uncoated VHF “dummy” tag. Right: 5/16” Delrin pin and self-threading flat-head screw attachment (on a slightly earlier tag version).

4. *Perform, under controlled circumstances, field tests of new tag designs resulting from laboratory studies conducted as part of this project, including:*

Field tests of the tag design resulting from evaluation of previous deployments and computational flow dynamics modeling were conducted during May-August 2012. Ten experimental tags were deployed on long-term resident bottlenose dolphin adults or juveniles in Sarasota Bay, Florida, in conjunction with health assessment operations during 7-10 May 2012 (Table 1). Three of these were Wildlife Computers Splash10 satellite-linked time-depth recording (TDR) tags. The other seven were VHF tags in identical configurations as the TDR tags, prepared by Wildlife Computers (Figure 1). Half of these were treated with *Propspeed* antifouling coating, and the other half were left uncoated. In three cases, both members of strongly bonded male pairs were tagged, with one receiving a coated and the other receiving an uncoated tag, to control for potential differences in exposure to biofouling organisms related to differential habitat use. The dolphins were observed, photographed, and video-recorded over the 69-92 days they carried tags. Eight of the dolphins were recaptured in July 2012, the tags were removed, and health assessments were performed, 69-75 days after deployment. The remaining male pair (F242 and F164) was observed until the tags came off their fins, as designed, sometime between post-deployment day 92 and 119 (Table 1).

Table 1. Tag deployment and recovery data for Sarasota Bay bottlenose dolphins. “FB” indicates the dolphin’s identification code (based on freeze-brand number).

FB	Sex	Deploy Date	Recover Date	# Days	Tag Type	Coated
F113	F	7-May-12	20-Jul-12	75	SPLASH10	Yes
FB20	M	7-May-12	18-Jul-12	73	SPLASH10	Yes
F258	M	7-May-12	18-Jul-12	73	VHF	No
F242	M	8-May-12	na	92-119	SPLASH10	Yes
F164	M	8-May-12	na	92-119	VHF	No
F159	F	8-May-12	19-Jul-12	73	VHF	No
F142	M	9-May-12	16-Jul-12	69	VHF	No
F276	M	9-May-12	16-Jul-12	69	VHF	Yes
F221	F	10-May-12	20-Jul-12	72	VHF	Yes
F252	M	10-May-12	20-Jul-12	72	VHF	No

Preliminary analyses indicate that the new tag design worked very well. Fin damage was minimal compared to earlier tag designs, with little or no migration of the attachment pin through the fin (Figure 2). Observations of the tagged dolphins with the tags found no behavioral differences associated with the tags, in terms of respiration patterns or ranging patterns. No differences in social patterns were observed. Both tagged adult females became pregnant while carrying tags. Follow-up assessments in July found no indication of health problems associated with the tags. The anti-fouling coating worked very well. Minimal growth occurred on coated tags as compared to the heavy growth on uncoated tags (Figure 3).

5. *Publish findings in a series of peer-reviewed manuscripts in a timely manner, including the initial review of previous deployments and results of tests in the proposed project.*

Only eight months into the project, publications are planned, but not yet produced. Detailed analyses of behavioral and health data remain to be completed.

IMPACT/APPLICATIONS

Preliminary indications are that the tag design, attachment, and coating combination developed during this project are a significant improvement over previous designs, in terms of performance and reduction of risk of injury to the animal. The results of this project suggest that researchers or cetacean rehabilitation facility managers may now have a small cetacean satellite-linked tag (and potentially other electronic tags) option that can be applied with a high level of confidence for optimal data collection over periods of months and minimal concern about impacts of the tag on bottlenose dolphins. However, the design has only been tested on a few individuals of a single species; more testing would be warranted.

RELATED PROJECTS

None



Figure 2. The dorsal fin of adult male F242, 119 days post-deployment. The tag was attached for at least 92 days before coming off the dorsal fin, as designed. The only remaining evidence of tagging is a small hole near the bottom of the fin, with no indication of necrosis. Photo by Sarasota Dolphin Research Program, taken under NMFS Scientific Research Permit No. 15543.



Figure 3. Adult males F164 (left) and F242 (right) 92 days post-deployment, showing heavy biofouling on F164's uncoated tag, and no growth on F242's coated tag. Photo by Sarasota Dolphin Research Program, taken under NMFS Scientific Research Permit No. 15543.